Red Bows In Her Hair

By: Suzume CA

Prelude to Yamiberry: In their continuing search for Hatsumi, Hazuki and Lilith find themselves on Astraea Hill, where Hazuki meets an unexpected confidante in Minamoto Chikaru, a young lady with very familiar red bows in her hair. Yamibou/Strawberry Panic crossover.

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Hazuki

STANDARD DISCLAIMER: I own neither *Yami to Boushi to Hon no Tabibito* nor *Strawberry Panic* . I own none of the characters within. What I do own is a plot bunny that refused to die after I watched these two series back-to-back. This is my first attempt at writing in an anime setting, and I hope to do the characters justice.

For those who've seen one of these and not the other, please see the footnote at the end of this chapter for extremely brief rundowns of the characters and situations. For those who've seen neither, you are very brave to consider reading on.

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Part 1: Hazuki

If nothing else, Hazuki decided, at least the transitions themselves were getting easier.

Their search for Hatsumi had taken them from one world to another, from one book to another, and by now, at least, Hazuki could manage the journey from library to book-world without wracking nausea. For Lilith, stepping between worlds seemed as easy as breathing, and as a consequence Hazuki had decided early in the search that she was never going to allow her companion to see even a moment of weakness.

As the glow of transition faded and the world repainted itself around them, the first things Hazuki noted were the trees, many of which

were bare of leaf. That, along with the chill in the air, suggested winter, or at the latest early spring, but where?

"Where are we this time?" she asked.

Lilith, the keeper of the Great Library, gave a melodramatic sigh. "You always ask me that, Hazuki-chaaaaaaan," she replied, stretching the honorific into a plaintive whine.

"And you seldom give me a straight answer."

With another flouncing sigh, Lilith leaned into Hazuki, her face twisted into a childish pout. "You should relax more and enjoy the journey, Hazuki-chan. Is my company so terrible?"

"Where are we, Lilith?" Hazuki asked again, determined not to let the librarian see her discomfort at the near-constant flirting.

Lilith gave a *humph* -sound, apparently giving up for now. "I've never been into this story, but Ken-chan is certain Eve has been here."

Has been here, Hazuki thought to herself grimly. That was always the way. They had followed Hatsumi (or Eve, as Lilith knew her) through at least half a dozen of these world-stories, but in each of them had found only traces of her sister's presence: marks she had left on the world, and its inhabitants. Lives she had changed. Lives like Hazuki's own.

Taking a deep breath to center herself for the search, Hazuki set off through the woods, sword sheathed for the time being.

"Where are you going?" Lilith asked her.

"This way," Hazuki replied, simply.

"Oooh, you're impossible, Hazuki-chan," Lilith growled, but she followed all the same.

After a brief, silent walk through the oddly peaceful woods, Hazuki pulled up short. "Listen," she hissed.

Lilith tipped her enormous hat to one side and cocked her head. "Voices," she whispered.

For a moment, Hazuki felt strangely disoriented. They were voices, yes, but there was something unsettlingly familiar about them. Girls' voices. Happy, laughing, chattering, sometimes even squealing with glee: a combination she hadn't heard since leaving her own world seemingly months before.

Impulsively, she took off running, leaving a surprised Lilith calling after her. Closer the voices came, until she emerged from the cover of the trees and into a scene she had begun to think she might never see again.

"A school?" she whispered to herself.

There was no mistaking it: from the building itself, which positively screamed "boarding school," to the uniforms worn by the many young women (most of them pink and tan, with short checkered skirts), Hazuki had, against all possibility, wandered into a modern-day Japanese academy for girls. Had Lilith somehow brought her back to her own world after all?

"Hi there!" a voice bubbled beside her. "Are you here for the Transformation Club?"

Hazuki shook herself back to reality (such as it was), and was surprised to suddenly find herself confronted by three of the pink-uniformed schoolgirls. "Uh," was all she had time to say before the older two of the three (one with light brown pigtails, the other with rectangular glasses and hair that actually appeared to be a shade of green) were suddenly all over her.

"Oooh, I love the uniform! Perfect sailor- *fuku!* "

"Are the bandages part of the costume, or is your leg really hurt?"

"That sword! Oh, how beautiful! It's not real, is it? The Sisters wouldn't let you keep a real one on school grounds, would they?"

"It's a great look! Very tall, dark and bishoujo!"

"Hey, I don't recognize you. Are you from Miator or Spica?"

"Uh," Hazuki repeated, not able to get anything else out through the barrage of friendliness.

"Oh, we're so rude!" the pigtailed one gasped, but then quickly smiled and gave a small bow. "My name is Hyuga Kizuna," she beamed.

"Natsume Remon," the bespectacled girl bowed, copying her friend's pose.

Baffled, but feeling no real danger, Hazuki returned the introduction. "A- Azuma Hazuki."

"We're so happy to meet you, Hazuki-san!" the one called Kizuna grinned. "So are you from Miator or Spica?"

Hazuki was about to explain that she did not know what either of those meant, but Kizuna and Remon were suddenly looking past her, eyes wide, each giving a tiny gasp. Hazuki looked around to see that Lilith had emerged from the woods, looking a bit winded from her pursuit. "There you are, Hazuki-chan!"

With twin squeals of unmitigated delight, Kizuna and Remon all but knocked Hazuki over as they pounced on the new arrival. The brief look of terror on Lilith's face was almost enough to make Hazuki crack a smile.

"You look *amazing!* "

"That hat! I could swear the eye is really looking at me!"

"Those garters!"

"Your hair! It must have taken you *hours!* "

"Are you some sort of naughty witch?"

"Did you make this yourself?"

Still babbling questions, the two schoolgirls each took one of Lilith's hands and practically dragged her along with them, Hazuki apparently forgotten for the time being.

"You have to show us how you did this!"

"Can I try the hat?"

"How do you make the eye move like that? It is like a puppet?"

Hazuki watched them go, the smile still threatening to emerge. It was somewhat satisfying to see Lilith the target of such attention for a change, but Hazuki realized that she should probably rescue her if they were going to continue their search for Hatsumi without alerting the entire school, or indeed its superiors, to their presence.

Before she could take a step, though, she felt a tug at her skirt. Looking down, she found herself peering into the deep, unblinking eyes of the third and youngest of the pink-uniformed students. This one carried a teddy bear, making her look perhaps even younger than she was.

"Hello," Hazuki said, crouching down beside the diminutive girl. "I'm Hazuki."

The little one stared at her for a few moments more, then looked into the eyes of her bear. "Percival thinks you're not from Spica *or* Miator," she said in a tiny voice. "Are you here looking for someone?"

"Yes," Hazuki blinked, somewhat surprised by the perceptiveness of the odd child. "I'm looking for my sister. What's your name?"

"Kagome," she all but whispered. She then waved one of the bear's arms at the older girl. "This is Percival. He thinks he knows who can help you. I think so too."

"Who's that?"

Without another word, Kagome again grasped the hem of Hazuki's skirt and led her toward the main entrance to the school building. Sitting on the wide front steps was another student, this one older than either of the three she'd met thus far. She was busily sewing something - a dress of some sort - and she had long, black hair, decorated with…

"Hello, Kagome-chan," the girl smiled warmly, before turning that smile up toward Hazuki. "And who is this?"

"Chikaru-sama, this is Azuma-sama," Kagome said by way of introduction. "She's looking for someone."

Setting aside her sewing, Chikaru stood to get a better look, and while her smile did not fade, a line appeared between her brows as she studied Hazuki carefully. "Greetings, Azuma-san," she bowed. "My name is Minamoto Chikaru, Student Council President of St. Lulim's."

Hazuki only half heard Chikaru's words, as she was staring mutely at the red bows in the other girl's hair. The face was completely different, the dark hair was the very opposite of Hatsumi's golden halo, but the bows…

Realizing suddenly that it was her turn to speak, she choked out "Hazuki. Azuma Hazuki."

"I'm glad to meet you, Hazuki-san," Chikaru replied, holding out one hand in a friendly manner.

Absently, still distracted by those familiar red bows, Hazuki reached out to take the other girl's hand. As soon as their fingers touched,

however, a jolt of energy passed between them, and the world momentarily flashed green behind Hazuki's eyes. She snatched her hand back, letting out an involuntary gasp, and as her vision focused once again she looked from a staring Kagome to a startled, but still smiling, Chikaru.

"Ha- Hatsumi..?" Hazuki said in a cracked whisper, finally recognizing the energy for what it was. She had been bathed in this same emerald radiance the night Hatsumi had disappeared, and had felt the tiniest traces of it during her travels through the worlds her sister had touched. Never before, though, had it been as strong as it was with this Chikaru.

Had this girl known her sister?

Chikaru studied Hazuki a while longer, tilting her head from one side to the other as she did. At last, she looked fondly at her classmate and said "Kagome-chan, when the rest of the club arrives, please tell them I won't be joining you today."

"Yes, Chikaru-sama," Kagome nodded, dismissing herself. "Percival says he hopes you find your sister, Azuma-sama."

Once the other two were alone, Chikaru collected the dress she'd been mending, then once again held out her hand to Hazuki. "Would you like some tea, Hazuki-san? I have a new herbal blend I've been meaning to try."

"Thank you," Hazuki replied, still somewhat shocked. She gingerly took the other girl's hand, feeling once more that surge of energy indicating Hatsumi's presence.

Chikaru blinked twice at the contact, apparently feeling the jolt as well, but it did not affect her smile in the slightest. "Afterward, you must tell me everything that brought you here, Hazuki-san…"

Still feeling slightly dazed, Hazuki was led away from the main building of St. Lulim's, and eventually to a large, triangular dormitory. They passed dozens of other students as they went, from the pink-checkered Lulim girls to those wearing close-fitting short white-and-gold dresses and elegant black-and-white gowns (the uniforms of St. Spica and St. Miator, as Chikaru explained). Absently, she noted that her new companion seemed to be fairly popular, as Chikaru was given warm greetings and friendly waves all the while. She felt many of those girls' eyes on her, as well, but no one asked any questions.

Finally, they arrived at what Hazuki guessed to be Chikaru's dormitory room. Once inside, Chikaru smiled and indicated a small tea table, then went to start up an electric kettle.

It was easily the most personalized living space Hazuki had ever witnessed. No surface had gone undecorated, and the small space was filled near to bursting with bolts of colorful fabric, costume and clothing items in various stages of completion, stuffed animals and puppets that appeared handmade, and not one but three easels, two of which held incomplete watercolors.

Hazuki slipped off her shoes and knelt at the table, laying her still-sheathed sword across her lap. A few minutes passed as Chikaru bustled about with the tea preparations, and Hazuki tried to think of something -- anything, really -- to say. Compared to the worlds she'd experienced since starting her search, this setting was almost surreal in its familiarity. For the first time, she truly felt the depth to which the journey had changed her. Did she truly belong anywhere any longer?

At length, Chikaru poured each of them a sweet-smelling herbal tea, then knelt opposite Hazuki and fixed her once again with those knowing eyes. "So, Hazuki-san," she smiled placidly, "you've come looking for your sister?"

Hazuki nodded. "Yes. My adoptive sister, Hatsumi. At least… she was Hatsumi to me." She still felt the need to tell everyone who

would listen that Hatsumi was not her relative by blood, as though this would somehow absolve her of her self-loathing.

"Do you mean she might not go by that name anymore?"

"I… don't know," Hazuki sighed, taking a sip of the tea to buy herself some time. Suddenly the whole story felt ridiculous to her. How could she explain the impossibility of it all to someone so… normal?

"Has she been gone long? Would you recognize her if you saw her again?"

This, at least, she could answer. "She disappeared on her sixteenth birthday. A… friend has been helping me trace her since then, and we've been following her trail for a few months. One of my friend's… contacts led us here."

"Intriguing," Chikaru nodded slowly. "So you think she might have transferred here, to one of our academies?"

"No, nothing so simple," Hazuki said, shaking her head. "It's… complicated. There's a lot I can't tell you."

Chikaru raised her eyebrows. "Perhaps intrigue was the right word after all. Would speaking of it put you or me in danger?"

Hazuki shook her head again, then took another sip of tea to steady herself. "No, it's nothing like that at all. It's just that if I told you… you'd think me insane."

A long silence ensued, and Hazuki looked anywhere but at Chikaru and her seeking eyes.

"Is it possible," Chikaru asked, delicately, "that Hatsumi might not want you to find her?"

"No, she didn't leave like that," Hazuki frowned, her frustration building. Of course that thought had occurred to her, in the lonelier

moments of her travels, but she could not allow herself to believe that Hatsumi would be so cruel.

"May I ask why you need to find her?"

"She's my sister," Hazuki snapped. "Isn't that enough?"

"Yes," Chikaru nodded, "but there's more to it than that, isn't there?"

Hazuki gritted her teeth. "Yes, there is."

"And you can't tell me about it."

"It doesn't matter," Hazuki growled. "I just need to find her. There were… things left unsaid between us, and I have to find her… to tell her… Whatever it takes, however many worlds I have to go through, I *have* to find her…" She ground to a halt, realizing too late that she had said too much. She looked away from Chikaru, silently praying that the other girl hadn't noticed the slip.

After a long sip of her tea, Chikaru broke the silence. "Tell me," she asked, "how many of these worlds have you been through thus far?"

Hazuki turned wide eyes on her. "I…" she started, but could not continue.

Chikaru set down her tea, then folded her hands on the tabletop and leaned forward slightly, filling Hazuki's vision with those uncanny eyes. "Perhaps," she suggested, "you should tell me the *whole* story, Hazuki-san."

Next: Hatsumi

AUTHOR'S NOTE:

In brief, the improbably named *Yami to Boushi to Hon no Tabibito* tells the story of Hazuki, whose beloved adoptive sister Hatsumi

disappeared on the night of her sixteenth birthday in a pillar of green energy, leaving Hazuki to pursue her from one world to the next alongside Lilith, the keeper of the Great Library in which all the myriad worlds are kept safe in books. As it turns out, Hatsumi is Eve, the original keeper (and Lilith's actual sister), who has taken to "visiting" the worlds one by one until departing each as she turns sixteen. Lilith wants to find Eve to make her take her job back, while Hazuki wants to find her because in spite of the guilt and shame she feels for it, she loves her desperately. Got all that? This series has been criticized for its storytelling style, which could charitably be called non-linear, its tendency toward blatant fanservice, and for its rather unsatisfying ending, but it seems that most everyone can agree that Hazuki is *Awesome* .

Meanwhile, *Strawberry Panic* tells the story of three neighboring girls' academies, and the endless crushes and romances that develop between their students. Yuri as far as the eye can see. Most of the intrigue takes place in the academies of St. Miator and St. Spica, with St. Lulim more or less rounding out the cast as the Hufflepuff of Astraea Hill. This story will largely feature characters from St. Lulim's, who actually appear to be some of the most well-adjusted and happy students in this drama-bomb setting (yes, even the girl with the teddy bear). This series has been criticized for its sometimes lol-tastic dialog, its melodrama, its exponentially increasing fanservice as you go along, and its very existence as a pastiche of cliches from innumerable other animes, but it seems that most everyone can agree that Chikaru is *Awesome* .

Hatsumi

Part 2: Hatsumi

The telling of the whole story, at Hazuki's request, took them out of Chikaru's dormitory and across the campus grounds. At least this way, Hazuki reasoned, she could make a run for it if things got too uncomfortable. The idea of being this nervous around a fellow schoolgirl was almost laughable after the dangers she'd faced in her travels thus far, but here she was, both struggling to find the words and ever conscious of the possibility of escape.

So instead, she tried to make small talk, in an effort to gather more information about her surroundings. Chikaru, for her part, seemed infinitely patient, obviously not wanting to press her guest.

"Can I ask you something?" Hazuki said at length, as they passed a pair of Spican girls walking in step, one with her head resting on the other's shoulder.

"Of course."

"This is a Catholic school, right?"

"Yes, it is."

"I thought it was, but… I can't help noticing…" she glanced over her shoulder at the retreating couple. While they were not overtly engaged in anything, it was obvious that there was something more than comfortable friendship between them.

"The gratuitous public displays of affection?" Chikaru grinned. "Does it bother you, Hazuki-san?"

"I… wouldn't have expected it."

"If you spend long in the Strawberry dorm, you'll see a fair share. Some are just more… obvious about it than others."

Rather than continue this bewildering train of thought, Hazuki tried to follow a safer path. "I heard you call this the Strawberry dorm before. Is that its real name?"

"No, it's just a long-standing nickname," Chikaru replied. "Some say it originated with an English exchange student, as a play on the name Astraea. Others say that from the air, the building looks like the vertical cross-section of a strawberry."

Hazuki arched an eyebrow at this. "Does it?"

"I find it best not to question our campus legends *too* deeply," Chikaru grinned merrily. "It takes the fun out of them. Plus, they give us some measure of fame in the wide world of academia."

"How well-known are these schools?"

"Why do you ask?"

"Because I've never heard of any of them," Hazuki admitted. "My mother was constantly trying to get me into a more prestigious academy to pursue athletics, but none of these names ever came up."

"Perhaps they don't exist in your world?" Chikaru asked.

So much for the small talk. Hazuki stopped and turned to the other girl, her face set. "Do you believe me?" she asked, pointblank. "Do you believe that I'm actually from another Japan, in another world?"

Chikaru studied her carefully, the smallest traces of a smile on her lips. "I believe you have a story to tell," she said gently, "but only when you're ready."

They stared at one another for a while, and then Hazuki nodded. With that, they resumed their stroll, Chikaru guiding the way as

Hazuki spoke.

She talked about growing up with Hatsumi, her older sister by adoption. They had shared everything as children, and even though Hatsumi had been mute since birth (or so their parents had said), they had always been close, seemingly communicating in a language only they could understand. When Hazuki had been stricken with a wasting, debilitating childhood illness, Hatsumi had never left her side, and somehow, Hazuki knew, it was her sister's love that had saved her life, and allowed her to grow into the tall and strong young woman she was today.

Over the years, with the increasing loss of their parents to the corporate world, the dynamic of their relationship had changed, with Hazuki eventually assuming the role of the protective older sister for the naïve Hatsumi, fending off the endless suitors drawn to her quiet loveliness. In the end, Hazuki's world had seemingly shrunk to encompass only the two of them, but she hadn't cared: she had everything she needed.

When it got to the actual telling of Hatsumi's disappearance, the supernatural, otherworldly elements of the story actually felt easier to talk about than the conflicted, shameful emotions wrapped up in those final months together. "It was late, on the night before her sixteenth birthday. I had… been upset with her that evening when I saw her opening another love letter from one of her admirers, and when I tried to snatch it from her, her wrist was cut by the letter-opener. I bandaged her, and even though she made it clear that she wasn't upset, I was… so ashamed. And since I couldn't sleep that night, I decided to… check on her."

Here, Hazuki paused and licked her dry lips, remembering all too vividly what came next. She noticed that Chikaru was watching her closely, her expression unreadable.

"I sat next to her and watched her sleep for a moment, but then the clock struck midnight, and… she spoke to me for the first time."

"What did she say?" Chikaru asked, quietly.

"My name. She said Hazuki-chan."

"And then what happened?"

She closed her eyes, the scene replaying once again in her memory. "The room was… flooded with light. The whole world was warm and green, and I could barely see. When I looked for Hatsumi, I saw that… she was the source. She was glowing brighter than the sun, and was actually floating above her bed, looking down at me."

"Incredible," Chikaru whispered.

"I called her name and tried to reach for her, but… before I could, the light just… exploded from her, and when I could see again, she was gone. I searched the house up and down, but I knew in my heart that she was gone, and… I felt my entire world folding in around me."

Eyes filled with what looked like genuine sympathy, Chikaru whispered "I'm so sorry. But then you were able to follow her somehow?"

Hazuki turned back to Chikaru and studied her face carefully. She was waiting for a sign that she was being strung along, or that the other girl would soon laugh at the outlandish nature of the tale, but that reaction did not come. "Do you *honestly* believe me?" After all, Hazuki was living it, and sometimes she didn't even believe it.

Speaking with obvious attention to her words, Chikaru answered her by saying "Let's just continue on with the assumption that I *do* believe you, and see where the story takes us from here, shall we?"

By this time they had ventured back into the woods where Hazuki's journey into this world had begun. There was something oddly comfortable about the setting, in spite of the chilly air and the bare branches. Even though Chikaru had not quite answered the question, Hazuki felt that it would be safe to continue.

She talked about meeting Ken-chan in Hatsumi's bedroom minutes after the disappearance, and how she had… *convinced* the odd little bird to allow her to follow him in his own search for Hatsumi (by threatening him with the aforementioned letter-opener). The bird had brought her to the Great Library, where Hazuki had met his mistress Lilith, the Library's keeper. It was there that Hazuki had learned the whole story: the girl she knew as Hatsumi was Lilith's sister Eve, who had abandoned her post as keeper to visit world after world, living in each (and its corresponding book on the Library shelves) until leaving it upon turning sixteen. Lilith had since taken to sending Ken-chan into worlds with a strong *Souma* presence, trying to track down her missing sibling and get her to resume her duties.

Chikaru had been by and large listening attentively, appearing to take the fantastic details at face value, but at this she raised a question. " *Souma?* What's that?"

"The… green light, I think," Hazuki explained, still not entirely certain of this herself. "It's part of the keepers' power, and because I was with Hatsumi when she disappeared, and was bathed in the light… that's why I'm able to move between worlds with Lilith and Ken-chan. At least, that's what Lilith *tells* me." She then paused to regard her sword. "As odd as it sounds, this *was* Hatsumi's letter-opener, but because it touched her blood hours before her departure, it changed into this sword as soon as I carried it into the library for the first time."

"May I see it?" Chikaru asked.

To Hazuki's own surprise, she offered it to the other girl without hesitation. Chikaru drew it from its sheath, holding it expertly as she turned it in her hand, admiring the shining blade. "It's lovely," Chikaru noted, before sheathing it and returning it to its owner.

"It's saved my life several times already," Hazuki admitted. "I'm actually surprised it stayed this way in such a normal world as this."

They walked on, and after a few more steps, Chikaru paused to place her hand on the wide trunk of a tree that stood slightly apart

from all the others, almost in its own small clearing. The schoolgirl's face grew distant for a moment, but then she turned back to Hazuki and went on briskly. "So you've been hopping from world to world with Lilith ever since?"

Again, Hazuki found herself baffled by (and more than a little suspicious of) Chikaru's seemingly blasé acceptance of everything she'd heard to this point. "Do you really believe everything I've told you?"

Chikaru grinned mischievously. "The way you keep asking me that, Hazuki-san, makes me wonder if *you* really believe it."

"I have to," Hazuki sighed. "If it will take me back to Hatsumi, I'll follow along with Lilith and her mad little bird. Whatever I must do, I'll find her again."

"And that brings me back to one of my original questions. Hazuki-san, *why* do you need to find her?"

Hazuki had hoped that they would not come back to this, but it seemed obvious that Chikaru was too curious to let the matter drop. Amidst all the fantastic details, she had found her way back to the most unnerving question of all.

"If you believe what you've told me," Chikaru went on, "about who your sister really is, then why do you need so badly to find her again?"

"She's my sister," Hazuki grated, repeating the answer she'd given in the dormitory.

"I know that. But you've undertaken quite a journey to find her, and I don't think it's simply because you feel guilty about accidentally cutting her with the letter-opener."

"She's my sister," Hazuki repeated, praying that this would be enough for the maddeningly inquisitive girl.

By this time they had emerged from the cover of the woods, and onto a wide path that led to a beautiful greenhouse. Chikaru softly put a hand on Hazuki's shoulder and turned her, trying to meet her eyes, but Hazuki hid behind her hair, not wanting to let Chikaru see the sudden tears that marred her vision.

"Hazuki-san," Chikaru asked gently, "were you in love with her?"

Every instinct told her to run: to get away from this mind-reading schoolgirl, find Lilith, and get back to the relative safety of the Library.

However, she did none of these things. "Yes," she whispered, brokenly.

Chikaru nodded slowly. "I understand."

Hazuki looked up to meet the other girl's deep brown eyes, searching for some reflection of what she herself felt. When she could not find it, though, she scowled and said "No, you don't. You *can't* . I loved her, but I also wanted her. I *desired* her. I wanted to hold her, to kiss her, to… lose myself in her eyes, and in her body. Now tell me you understand *that!* "

"I do," Chikaru insisted, her voice as gentle as ever. "Better than you know."

"These are *not* feelings you're supposed to have for your *sister!* It's not… *right*, it's not *natural!* " How could Chikaru keep looking at her like that? Why was there no revulsion in her eyes?

"But you've known all along that she's not your sister," Chikaru reminded her. "Not by blood."

"It's still wrong," Hazuki growled.

Chikaru went on as though she hadn't heard. "And at any rate, if everything you've told me is true, she…"

" *Chikaru-sama!"*

Hazuki panicked as she heard the new voice, and quickly wiped her eyes on her sleeve before looking around for its source. Three young women were approaching from the direction of the greenhouse: all three wore the elegant black-and-white uniforms of Miator, and all three were holding hands. The girl in the middle was the one who had shouted: while she was probably about Hazuki's age, her face, framed by loose auburn locks, held a youthful joy that made Hazuki's heart simply ache. To her right was a tall, strikingly beautiful woman whose hair was silver in spite of her young face. To her left was a darker-haired girl who also appeared to be about Hazuki's age, her large eyes merry and shining.

"Konnichi wa, Nagisa-chan!" Chikaru called happily as the girl in the middle broke from the line and all but dashed up to give the Lulim president a warm hug. Hazuki found herself unsettled by the familiarity of the gesture, suddenly feeling every bit like the intruder she was.

"Oh, Chikaru-sama, I'm so happy!" Nagisa beamed, as she broke from the embrace but still held onto the other girl's hands. "You were right. I told them everything, and they understood. They *understood*, Chikaru-sama!"

"As if there were any doubt," the dark-haired one giggled as she and the third Miatoran caught up. "My Nagisa-chan can charm anyone into understanding."

"Or at least talk them dizzy until they give in," the taller girl smiled fondly.

"I'm so proud of you," Chikaru grinned, squeezing Nagisa's hands.

"Who is this, Chikaru-sama?" Nagisa asked, seemingly noticing Hazuki for the first time. She looked briefly embarrassed by her exuberance, and gave a small bow.

"This is… an old family friend who's come to visit," Chikaru explained, reaching out to place her hand on Hazuki's arm. "My friends, this is Azuma Hazuki."

"I'm glad to meet you, Hazuki-sama," Nagisa smiled, her exuberance still spilling over past her attempt at politeness. "Aoi Nagisa."

"Suzumi Tamao," the dark-haired girl bowed.

"Hanazono Shizuma," added the tall one.

With that, excitement once again won out over politeness, and Nagisa turned back to Chikaru, chattering away about how much easier things had gone than she had expected, and how grateful she was for Chikaru's advice, and then suddenly inquiring as to how things were progressing with some sort of fashion show for which all three of them had volunteered. Most of the details went well over Hazuki's head as she watched from a safe distance, trying to make sense of what she was seeing. It didn't take much effort to notice that this Nagisa was the centerpiece of the trio, with the way both Shizuma and Tamao were watching her (the former with loving indulgence, the latter with sisterly adoration). Hazuki had little doubt, even from this brief display, that the red-haired girl was the very focus of the others' lives.

At that moment, the one called Tamao looked over and caught Hazuki's glance. She smiled in further greeting, and for a moment, their eyes locked.

And Hazuki, in the eyes of this stranger from a world not even her own, saw herself.

The moment passed quickly, as Tamao turned her attention back to Nagisa's ongoing narrative, but Hazuki's senses were swimming from the impact of it. Even though both of Nagisa's companions showed obvious devotion to her, there was something all too familiar in Tamao that was not present in Shizuma.

The happy discussion soon wrapped up, and with another series of hugs, clasped hands and nice-to-meet-yous, the three Miator girls continued on their way, once again holding hands, Nagisa comfortably in the center.

"Hazuki-san?" Chikaru said in a soft voice.

"Who are they?" Hazuki asked, distantly.

"I'm sorry, did you not catch their names? Those were…"

"No, I heard their names," Hazuki interrupted, still watching the receding trio. "I just meant… who *are* they?"

Chikaru nodded, picking up on Hazuki's meaning. "Those three," she smiled, "were the players in perhaps the most romantic love story this campus has ever known."

Hazuki blinked a few times, trying to process this, then turned wide eyes on Chikaru. "Wait, you mean… all *three* of them are..?" She waved her hand vaguely, not able to say the words.

"Oh, no, not like that!" Chikaru giggled, her eyes twinkling. "At least… I don't *think* they are. That would certainly be a creative solution, though."

"Then what…?" Hazuki was too shocked to even finish the thought.

"Nagisa transferred to Miator earlier this academic year," Chikaru explained, "and from the first day she arrived, she and Shizuma have been the talk of all Astraea. It was a long and sometimes torturous road they took to get where they are, but Shizuma finally declared her love in the most dramatic manner possible, and they've been together ever since."

Hazuki shook her head, unable to picture it. "And Tamao?"

"Nagisa's roommate," Chikaru explained, her smile softening. "She adores Nagisa, and always has, but for the sake of Nagisa's

happiness, she's set her own feelings aside, and finds joy in simply being the best friend and sister she can be."

"She did that?" Hazuki whispered, remembering the familiarity of Tamao's eyes. Was that how she herself had looked in her devotion to Hatsumi, wanting her so completely and yet knowing that it could never be?

"Sometimes if we love someone, we need to let them go," Chikaru nodded.

Hazuki gave her a sideways glare. "That wasn't very subtle," she said in a low voice.

"No, I suppose it wasn't," Chikaru admitted.

"Why did you tell me all of that?"

"Because you asked?"

Hazuki shook her head. "I know I did, but… why did you tell me so much about their private lives? Who am I to know that?"

Chikaru's eyes once again took on a merry glow. "First of all, the love affair between Shizuma and Nagisa was anything but private: they played it out in front of the entire school. Secondly, everyone knows how Tamao felt about Nagisa, with the possible exception of Nagisa herself."

"How is that even possible?" Hazuki asked. "How could they be so… bold? How does… that sort of thing happen here, without anyone seeing it as being…"

She could not finish the sentence, but Chikaru did it for her. "Wrong?"

Their eyes met for a moment, and then Hazuki looked away, suddenly ashamed.

"Poor Hazuki-san," Chikaru sighed. "Your world must be a very cold place. I'm… I'm so sorry she wasn't able to help you past what's inside you."

"What do you mean?" Hazuki whispered, still unable to look up at the other girl.

"Your sister. Hatsumi. Eve. However you prefer to think of her. I wish she could have helped you…"

Here, Chikaru took one of Hazuki's hands in both of hers. "… the way she helped me."

With those words, the emerald spark of energy flashed between them even as realization struck. Hazuki looked up into those eyes, into that face framed by those familiar red bows, and gasped. "What… what are you saying?"

Chikaru smiled gently, reaching to brush Hazuki's hair back out of her eyes. "Haven't you guessed? Hatsumi… was my sister, too."

Next: Chikaru

Chikaru

Part 3: Chikaru

"You knew all along I was telling the truth, didn't you?"

Chikaru turned her head sideways to look at Hazuki. "Not *all* along, but I figured it out fairly early."

Still not trusting herself to look into the other girl's eyes, Hazuki continued staring at the ceiling. "You could have spared me a lot of aggravation and told me sooner."

"Not really. Besides, I needed to hear your story."

The two girls were back in Chikaru's dormitory, though for the life of her, Hazuki could not remember how they had gotten there. Things were a bit hazy after the thunderbolt moment of revelation, and Hazuki was only vaguely aware of the steps that had led her back here. The two of them were lying together atop Chikaru's neatly-made bed, still keeping a hand firmly clasped between them, feeling the comforting flow of the *Souma* they shared.

"Did you really not suspect anything?" Chikaru asked at last, giving Hazuki's hand a squeeze. "Even when you first felt this?"

"Maybe for a moment, but I guess I put it out of my head."

"You *do* realize what this makes us, don't you?"

Here, Hazuki did finally turn to look at her. "What?"

"We're sisters," Chikaru smiled widely. "You're my long-lost sister from another world."

They stared at each other for a moment, then both of them dissolved into laughter. It was the first time Hazuki had genuinely laughed in… well, certainly in the time since losing Hatsumi. "Are you sure…" she managed between chuckles, "that you want *me* for a sister? Remember what I told you about the last one?"

"If it'll get you to laugh about it, I'll take my chances," Chikaru giggled.

The laughter faded, leaving a surprisingly comfortable silence. Where Lilith's constant proximity had always been difficult to bear, Hazuki felt nothing of the sort here, even while lying in the bed of this girl she'd met only hours before. For perhaps the first time since leaving her world, she felt completely safe.

"What was she like?" Hazuki asked, letting her gaze return to the ceiling.

"Hmm?"

"Your Hatsumi."

Chikaru stretched briefly to retrieve something from her headboard, then held out a framed photo where both could see. There, indeed, was Hatsumi, in a Lulim uniform, her arms around a younger Chikaru. The two of them were standing together with several other girls, one of whom Hazuki recognized as Shizuma, the silver-haired beauty from earlier.

"Her name was Minamoto Naoko," Chikaru began. "She was my elder by two years, and she was the best teacher and the best friend I've ever known."

Hazuki stared into the familiar eyes, wondering not for the first time if she'd ever have the chance to truly gaze into their depths again. Rather than think about this, though, she indicated two of the other girls in the picture. "That's Shizuma, but the girl with her isn't Nagisa, is it?"

"No, Nagisa didn't arrive until last spring. Her name was Kaori: she and Shizuma were Etoile together."

"Etoile?"

"Mmm, think Head Girl, but representing all three of the schools. A position of great honor and responsibility."

Hazuki nodded faintly, her eyes returning to Hatsumi. She knew, from Lilith, that Hatsumi had lived out many lives in many worlds, but to be confronted with this photograph, and to be holding hands with someone who had shared an entire life with her and known her by a different name, Hazuki's mind spun with confusion. She gripped Chikaru's hand more tightly for a moment, reminding herself of the *Souma*, but even as she felt it intensify between them, a strange doubt gnawed inside.

"Tell me something," she said, a lump rising in her throat as she remembered Chikaru's words from earlier. *The way she helped me…*

"Hmm?"

"Naoko… were you… in love with her?"

Chikaru pondered the question for a moment before answering. "Not like you were, I don't believe. I certainly had a crush on my onee-sama, but nothing as… *intense* as you described."

Hazuki let out a breath she hadn't realized she was holding. While part of her was relieved, still another part wondered what was so *wrong* with her to have the desires she'd experienced.

"It may have been because of our age difference," Chikaru went on. "We were two years apart, and I'm guessing you and she were much closer."

"Separated by less than a month, yes."

"And anyway," Chikaru smiled wickedly, "by the time I started having *those* sorts of thoughts, I was safe and sound here at St. Lulim's."

"Safe and sound," Hazuki repeated, letting out a dry chuckle. "What is it about this place, anyway? How does a Catholic school become a haven for…" Again, she waved her free hand in a vague circle, unable to say the words.

"Gratuitous public displays of affection?"

"You know what I meant."

Chikaru placed the photo back on her headboard, then rolled to her side to better meet Hazuki's eyes. "Would you like me to tell you more about Naoko?"

"Yes, I would," Hazuki nodded, a bit surprised at the change of subject, but no less curious about her sister's life here.

Smiling softly, her eyes distant with memory, Chikaru began. "My parents adopted Naoko when she was almost a year old, and I was born about a year later, so I never knew what it was like to not have a sister. She was mute, like Hatsumi, but that was never a barrier. She taught me everything when I was a girl: how to draw, how to sew… starting with these, as a matter of fact." She indicated the bows in her hair, so reminiscent of Hatsumi's. "She was gentle and kind, and even though she never said a word, she had an effortless magnetism to her that drew everyone in."

Hazuki could not help but echo the soft smile. "So familiar."

"I was devastated when she went away to St. Lulim's for the first time. Those were the longest two years of my life, but even in her absence she inspired me. All I knew was that I had to work my hardest, so that one day I could attend with her and share her life again."

Again, Hazuki found herself nodding along, remembering how she had turned down even the idea of applying to an athletics-oriented academy in order to continue going to school with Hatsumi. Her mother had called it lack of ambition, of course, but Hazuki knew better.

"Then, when I finally arrived," Chikaru went on, "I discovered that Naoko had already worked her magic here. Even as a third-year, she was one of the most beloved figures in all Astraea. I'm told she could have been Etoile if she'd wished, but she didn't need to be. She'd already found her way into the hearts of one and all."

"Did she have many… suitors?" Hazuki asked carefully.

Chikaru's eyes became even more distant. "Funny you should ask that. She certainly had admirers, and yes, there were those whose admiration touched upon romantic in nature, but… I don't think that she ever had any direct attachments. But you need to understand that even as recently as that, the idea of two girls being romantically involved was all but forbidden here."

"What changed that?"

Chikaru gave Hazuki's hand another brief electrical squeeze. "Naoko did," she whispered.

"But you said she…"

"Not by direct example," Chikaru interrupted. "Not by any public affairs of her own. She simply had a wisdom and a… goodness to her, trite as that sounds, and girls were constantly coming to her for advice. Particularly those whose feelings might… put them at odds with themselves, or their faith. She opened the eyes of anyone wrestling with emotions they couldn't understand. She even melted the hearts of the Sisters to some degree. With her help, Shizuma and Kaori ran for Etoile as the first truly open and accepted lesbian couple in school memory. She reminded us, one and all, that true love is difficult enough to find, even without the restrictions that the

world around us might try to place, and that it should never be caged by fear and doubt."

Hazuki's thoughts reeled as she took in Chikaru's impassioned words, amazed that her quiet, naïve Hatsumi could have been the instrument of such change.

"Things were different after she left us," Chikaru continued, sorrow creeping into her voice. "Kaori died soon after, when an illness that had been in remission suddenly reappeared, and those two losses were difficult for everyone to bear. But both of them left a mark, and none of us who were here have ever forgotten. And any new students who join us, well, we do our best to teach them."

"How did she leave?" Hazuki asked.

"In a way that you'll no doubt find familiar," Chikaru smiled sadly. "Just like you, it was the evening before her sixteenth birthday, and I couldn't sleep. I was looking out the window of my room, and saw her wandering outside well after curfew, so I bundled myself up and followed. When I found her, she was out in the woods, sitting at the foot of one of the taller trees, looking as though she were waiting for something. I called out to her, but she didn't notice me until I was right beside her."

"Did she… speak?"

"Yes, for the first time, just as it was with you. She said 'Chi-chan, you shouldn't be here,' but she was smiling. I hugged her, and then… she glowed like a star, and streaked away into the heavens in a flash of brilliant green."

After a pause to take a deep breath and let it out, Chikaru went on. "And that was when I finally knew what she was."

Hazuki looked at her askance. "The keeper of a cosmic library that holds all the worlds in books?"

"No," Chikaru laughed, tightening her grip on Hazuki's hand. "An angel."

She let the word hang between them for a moment before she continued. "I'd lived my life with an angel watching over me, and that angel gave us this wonderful place to grow up and be what we were meant to be, all of us. I… only wish she'd been able to do the same in your world as well."

What had started as a dull ache in Hazuki's chest was quickly growing into a suffocating weight as a grim realization hit. "But I didn't let her," she whispered.

"It's not your fault. It's what your world did to you."

"You don't understand; it *is* my fault," Hazuki insisted, tears again welling in her eyes. "I was selfish. I wanted her to love me, and me only. She once told me that she loved everyone, but loved me best of all… and that wasn't enough. I wanted her all to myself. Did I… keep her from doing what she was meant to do? Did I hold her back?"

After a long pause, Chikaru retrieved a tissue from the vicinity of her headboard and dabbed at Hazuki's tear-streaked face. "Poor Hazuki-chan. With all you've been through, you've grown accustomed to blaming yourself for everything. Do you want to know what I think?"

Unable to find her voice, Hazuki simply nodded her head, looking up at the other girl's peaceful expression.

"I think there's no shame at all in falling in love with an angel," Chikaru whispered. "Any more than there is in falling in love with anyone. I only wish you could have seen it sooner."

"I should have told her," Hazuki managed. "I should have trusted her."

"Then I think I finally have an answer to my question."

When Hazuki's forehead creased with confusion, Chikaru smiled and continued. "Now I know why you need so badly to find her."

That said, Chikaru again settled down beside her. Hazuki's heart was beginning to unclench as wave after wave of the *Souma* flowed over her, easing her apprehensions.

Suddenly, another realization struck. "You were with her when she left your world."

"Mmm hmm."

"That's why you have the *Souma.* "

"And?" Chikaru grinned, looking at Hazuki with amusement.

"You… you could come with us!"

"Mmm, I suppose I could, at that. But… as fond as I've quickly become of my long-lost sister from another world, I don't think I'm meant to."

"What do you mean?" Hazuki asked, puzzled.

"Well, even with some of the walls around our hearts removed, there are still going to be those in need of advice, or comfort. I had a very good teacher in Naoko, and I'd like to continue in her place. I'll never *be* Naoko, but I owe it to her to keep trying." Her eyes shone as she smiled wryly. "Aside from which, I don't have a magic letter-opener to bring with me."

"Don't you want to see Hat… Naoko again, though?"

"Of course I do, but I already know that I will. I'm lucky: she left me at peace."

Hazuki nodded. It had been a wild idea to begin with, and she certainly couldn't fault Chikaru for wanting to stay. "I understand."

"Though if I may, I'd like to make a counter-offer. Stay here, in this world that she made. Let life in Astraea finish the work she started with you."

"I can't do that," Hazuki said softly, even though the offer was tempting on many levels.

"I know. But… you'd be welcome here, whatever you think you might be. You know that, right?"

"I do," Hazuki nodded, her face twisting into an amused half-grin. "Though I imagine I'd have a hard time transferring in, since this world may already have its own Azuma Hazuki."

"Bridge to be crossed at another time," Chikaru waved, dismissing the thought with a smile.

With that, she sat up, and for the first time since returning to the room, she pulled her hand free from Hazuki's, leaving the other girl momentarily disoriented by the lack of contact. It didn't take long, however, for Hazuki to recognize the continuing presence of the *Souma* in herself.

"These were hers," Chikaru said, busily unfastening one of the bows that decorated her raven hair. "Usually I wear the ones that she taught me to sew myself, but for some reason I wanted to wear hers today. Now, at least, I know my instincts were right." Once both were unfastened, she pressed them into Hazuki's open hand. "Do you want to take them with you?"

Hazuki's eyes went wide. "I can't do that. I can't take something she left for you."

"Consider it a talisman, to help you on your journey. Something of hers to guide you."

"I can't. Besides, I already have her comb, and… and her letter-opener. I used to have her picture on my phone, but the battery died

back in some prehistoric cave dwelling."

"Then we can split the difference," Chikaru giggled, leaving one of the bows in Hazuki's hand and putting the other back in her hair. "One for you, and one for me. Something to help you remember your long-lost sister from another world."

Hazuki closed her fingers around the soft red ribbon. It almost seemed to have a trace of the *Souma* itself, and in spite of the overall failure of this visit, she knew it would bring her some comfort on the road ahead. "Thank you, Chikaru-san."

"Will you be leaving soon?"

"We probably should," Hazuki sighed. "We keep arriving in worlds after she's left them; perhaps next time we'll be more fortunate. I should rescue Lilith, at any rate."

"Yes, where *is* this Lilith of yours, anyway? I should very much like to meet her."

"I doubt that," Hazuki snorted. "I left her with two of your schoolmates. Something about a Transformation Club?"

Chikaru brought one hand to her face, her eyes going wide. "Oh, dear. Kizuna and Remon?"

"I think so."

"Um, yes, that's the… cosplay club."

As if on cue, there was a knock at the door, accompanied by Kizuna's happy voice. "Chikaru-sama, are you there? Is Hazuki-san with you? Kagome said she might be."

Hazuki exchanged bemused glances with Chikaru, then got up to answer the door.

There, smudged with makeup and covered in loose strips of fabric, looking very smugly pleased with themselves, were Kizuna and Remon. Between them stood Lilith, in full geisha garb and painted face, a pair of chopsticks stuck between the peaks of her ever-present hat.

"What do you think, Hazuki-chan?" she smiled seductively, spreading her arms wide and thrusting out one hip.

"I'll be out in a moment," Hazuki replied, deadpan. She then closed the door on her dismayed companion.

"They do enjoy their work," Chikaru shrugged.

Their eyes met, and Hazuki suddenly began to tremble with silent laughter. "I think we need to go now, before she decides she enjoys it too much here."

Chikaru crossed the small space and enfolded Hazuki in her arms, warming the both of them with their shared energy. "Safe journey," she whispered, kissing the taller girl on the cheek.

"Thank you… for everything."

"It was my pleasure, Hazuki-chan."

At length they broke, and after one last squeeze of their joined hands, Hazuki took up her sword and joined Lilith in the hallway.

"See you soon," Chikaru whispered as Hazuki closed the door behind her.

Next: Eve

AUTHOR'S NOTE: This was originally where the story was going to end (or at least stop), because Hazuki of course has her own rather

depressing finale to get back to in her own anime, and I didn't want to blatantly contradict the source material. That in mind, the fourth (and final) chapter will be something of a re-telling of the end of Hazuki's journey in a way that I hope will be (more or less) faithful to the original and yet a good complement to the last three parts of this story.

Thank you for reading. I realize this story has, by its very crossover nature, a built-in limited audience, so I appreciate you sticking with it.

AUTHOR'S OTHER NOTE: Revised several hours after publication to change the age difference between Naoko and Chikaru, realizing that a three-year gap completely destroys the timeline. Oops.

Eve

BEFORE WE BEGIN: This chapter will contain several scenes from the final two episodes of *Yami to Boushi to Hon no Tabibito*, with dialogue adapted (and in most cases copied wholesale) from the Miyuki Fansubs translation. Many thanks for their impressive work.

Part 4: Eve

Snow had returned to Astraea Hill, leading the core members of the Mystery Club to escape the chill in one of their favorite unused classrooms. Chikaru looked up from her sketchbook to gaze fondly at her friends: Remon and Kizuna were entangled in a best thirty-three of sixty-five thumb-wrestle tournament while Kagome was quietly reading something to Percival (from this distance, it appeared to be Stephen Hawking's *Brief History of Time* -- in English -- held upside-down). Content with their happiness, she turned suddenly pensive eyes on the picture she'd just finished: that of a tall figure standing before a door, hand raised to knock, trapped in the moment of indecision before making her presence known.

"What are you working on, Chikaru-sama?" Kizuna suddenly asked, as she and Remon, having given up on their game, appeared to either side of their class president.

"New costumes?" Remon asked, peering over Chikaru's shoulder.

Before the older girl could answer, Kizuna let out a gasp of recognition. "That's the girl we met! The one with the sword! What was her name?"

"Azuma-sama," Kagome offered, before returning to her quiet narration.

"Hazuki, yes," Chikaru nodded, turning back a few pages. "I've been thinking about her a lot lately. Even… dreaming about her."

"And drawing her, it looks like," Remon agreed.

"Wait, what's that one?" Kizuna asked, holding out one hand to keep the next page from turning.

It was an image that had troubled Chikaru even as it took shape under her pencil well before dawn, with the vividness of the dream fading as she'd fumbled for her sketchbook and bedside lamp. Hazuki was kneeling on what could only be called a garden path in the middle of the cosmos, desperately embracing the fair-haired woman before her.

At long last, in this empty place between worlds, Hazuki had Hatsumi in her arms. "Let's go," she whispered, tears falling on her beloved's shoulder. "Let's go back home." Hatsumi held her close, and for the first time since the journey had begun, Hazuki could finally feel joy.

It was not to last, though, as Hatsumi's next words chilled her to the core. "I'm sorry…"

"Hatsumi?" she gasped.

"I'm sorry," Hatsumi repeated, rising to her feet and taking a step back. From nowhere, a wind ruffled her golden hair, and before Hazuki's eyes, the familiar school uniform vanished, leaving Hatsumi standing before her as a being of pure light.

"This is the real me," Hatsumi's voice echoed through the emptiness. "Although the Hatsumi inside me did not disappear when I reached sixteen, I can no longer go back to being Hatsumi."

Hazuki struggled to her feet. "Hatsumi is Hatsumi!" she cried, stepping forward to take the glowing girl in her arms. Before she could touch her, though, a wave of brilliant green light slammed into

her, throwing her back several steps. It was the same *Souma* that had warmed and guided her throughout her travels, but this was the first time it had ever been a barrier.

"I am no longer Hatsumi," the brilliant girl whispered. "My name is Eve. I've been through many different lives until now, but the time for me to return to my true self has come."

"No!" Hazuki shouted. "I refuse to believe something like that!" Again, she reached forward, and again, she was thrown back, this time landing on her back.

"Hatsumi is Hatsumi!" she repeated, leaping to her feet and lunging toward the light. Each time she approached, the push of the *Souma* struck her more and more violently, but through the blinding pain, she continued trying.

"Please, Hazuki-chan!" Eve cried as Hazuki was again thrown into a crumpled heap. "Please stop!"

Gasping for breath, her body afire with agony, Hazuki slowly rose to her feet and turned to face the one who had been her sister. "Hatsumi," she begged, reaching out one hand, "let's go home together."

Eve gazed at her, shame and pity in her glowing eyes. "Hazuki-chan… I wonder if there's anyone who has loved me this deeply before?"

Hazuki took a step forward as Eve continued. "I want to go back with you too… but that's a dream that can never come true…"

Remon extended one finger toward the image of the other woman, the one with the bows in her light-colored hair, then pulled it back, gasping. "Chikaru-sama," she whispered, "isn't that… your sister?"

Chikaru gave her friend a sad smile. "Yes, it is. Hazuki and she were… very close."

"Ooh!" Kizuna grinned. "Were they just friend-friends, or were they kissing friends?"

"Hazuki loved Naoko very much," Chikaru sighed, "but I don't know that she ever got to tell her so, at least not in the way she wished. But maybe they can still have their chance…"

"I don't want you gone," Hazuki wept, falling to her knees before her Hatsumi, as Eve once again took the image of the fair schoolgirl. Heart torn, strength all but gone, she flung herself forward, burying her face in her beloved's lap. "Hatsumi, please come back with me! Please!"

Eve stroked Hazuki's hair gently. "You know, Hazuki-chan?" she smiled gently, "let's believe in us meeting again, as long as we're still alive. No matter how far away we're separated, our hearts are always one. We can always hear each other's heartbeat, no matter where we are." She then gently grasped Hazuki's shoulders and pushed her back to a sitting position. "I love you," she whispered. "No matter where I am, I won't forget you."

With that declaration, Eve leaned forward and kissed Hazuki's cheek, then once again rose to her feet and took a step back.

With a burst of green radiance, Eve changed before Hazuki's eyes, the hat formerly worn by Lilith appearing on her head, and her clothing shifting to match that of her fellow keeper. For the second time, Hazuki found herself bathed in the *Souma*, and with horror, she realized that she was truly going to lose Hatsumi all over again.

"This is what I'm really like," Eve's voice echoed. "Look at me carefully, and… please, don't forget me."

Just as it had that horrible night, the brilliance reached toward the heavens, and Eve vanished into the light. Hazuki screamed heavenward, feeling as though her soul were being torn from her. "*Hatsumi!"*

"I won't say goodbye," Eve's voice came from the emptiness, "because I will surely return to your side. Someday… I will become your child."

"Onee-chan," Hazuki whispered, her voice cracked and raw.

The voice swirled around her one last time before leaving her in silence. "Someday… I will become your child."

How long she stayed there on that bridge across the stars, she could not tell. At last, she reached numbly to retrieve her sword from where it had fallen, then rose and staggered a few steps down the path. She would have to finish her journey alone, now, though her shattered mind and aching body could barely place one foot in front of the other, much less find her way home.

A few steps more, and her strength left her completely. She pitched to one side and tumbled off the garden path, plummeting into emptiness.

"But Chikaru-sama," Remon asked, "I thought… I mean… Naoko *died*… didn't she?"

The next page held another troubling image: Hazuki falling through space, her eyes glassy and lifeless.

"Do you still miss your sister, Chikaru-sama?"

Chikaru gave Kizuna a wan smile. "Every day…"

The reunion with Lilith had been tempestuous, to say the very least (with Eve's attempt to make her sister hotcakes and tea proving less than sufficient to make up for her lengthy absence), but at last some measure of peace had returned to the Library.

Eve walked the endless stacks, re-familiarizing herself with the neatly organized worlds. She smiled softly as she brushed her fingers over the spines of the books, recognizing some of the ones she'd lived within.

Eventually, though, her wanderings brought her to the world of the sister she'd left behind. "Hazuki-chan," she whispered, taking this volume down from its shelf and turning it to a marked page. Unaware that Lilith was watching her carefully from a distance, Eve placed one hand on the open page, closing her eyes in concentration. "I wonder what she's doing now?"

In her mind's eye, she saw the empty home she'd once shared with Hazuki. She looked up and down through the darkened house, but there was no sign of the woman who had been her little sister. "Hazuki-chan…" she whispered, but touched only emptiness. "She's not here..?"

"Are you looking in the wrong book?" came Lilith's voice from her shoulder, startling her out of her contemplation.

"There's no way I can be mistaken," Eve replied, shaking her head. "I grew up with Hazuki-chan in *this* book!"

Lilith considered this. "Then that means… Hazuki didn't go back to her own world."

"That… seems so," Eve agreed, knowing full well that Hazuki should have been pulled back to her home after leaving the Universe Garden.

Frowning, Lilith went to check the nearby shelves. "The books that are in the same series should be around… here."

"You know a lot," Eve smiled.

"Well, I did look after this place for a long time," Lilith shrugged nonchalantly.

Eve's happy smile deepened, and Lilith scowled. "I was being sarcastic."

"Oh… sorry, onee-chan."

Leaving it be for now, Lilith scanned the nearest shelf, then her pretty face took on a puzzled expression. She reached for a familiar tome, flipped it open, placed one hand over it, then looked back at her sister. "Eve?"

"Did you find her?" Eve asked, excitedly.

Lilith passed her the book, her face still creased with confusion. "But… how did she wind up *here?* "

It was with great reluctance that Hazuki opened her eyes, finding herself curled in her familiar bed. In a very real sense, she'd hoped to fall through the universe forever, but in the end, she'd felt the pull of the *Souma* within her, guiding her home.

The first thing she saw was Hatsumi's letter-opener, now back to its original shape, clutched in her hand in place of her sword. Another indication that her journey had ended, and had done so in vain.

She flung it away from her, and heard a *THUNNG* as it stuck into the ceiling.

It took a great deal of time and effort, but at last she pushed herself up out of bed. Moving gingerly, almost mechanically, she emptied the pockets of her skirt, leaving a bejeweled comb, her keys, and a somewhat crumpled red hair-bow on her nightstand, then plugged her long-dead phone into its charger. Once this was done, she

staggered for the bathroom, leaving a trail of clothing behind her as she stripped down for her first shower in entirely too long.

She stood numbly under the spray until the water went cold, then dried herself off and pulled on a soft pair of flannel pajamas. Her mind was slowly starting to uncoil, but even as it did, her memories buzzed with conflicting images.

Wandering down the hall to Hatsumi's room, she found it empty and barren: a spare room, showing no sign of her sister's presence. Downstairs, she found pictures of herself and her parents, but none of Hatsumi.

Had she removed herself so completely from the world? Did she only exist now in Hazuki's memories?

But even those memories were at war with one another. There was the Hazuki that had grown up in Hatsumi's loving aura, and there was the Hazuki that had grown up alone, sickly and weak. There was the Hazuki who had journeyed to the primeval world, to ancient Japan, and to the distant future, and there was the Hazuki who had never left this home, except to live through the drudgery of a friendless life at school. There was the Hazuki who had helped the lovely spy Youko and the eternal child Milka, and there was the Hazuki who had spent endless nights home alone while her parents were away on business. There was the Hazuki who had met Chikaru on Astraea Hill, and finally started down the long path of realizing who she was, and what it meant, and there was the Hazuki who lived in fear of her feelings, withdrawing further into herself every year.

Most chillingly of all, though, there was the Hazuki who had fallen back to the world from nothingness, awakening reluctantly in her own bed at the end of her quest, and there was the Hazuki who had collapsed into that same bed hours before, the handful of sleeping pills churning in her stomach, wishing only for oblivion.

She found her way back to her room and sat back on the bed, eyes passing over the physical signs of her travels: the comb, the bow

and the knife. It had been real, but to that other Hazuki, it seemed nothing more than a dream.

She reached for her phone and flipped it open, wondering if it had charged enough to show Hatsumi's shining face again, but the picture was gone. Erased, just like every other trace of her.

Hazuki sank into her bed, wondering if she'd ever be able to sleep again.

Eve held the book in one hand, with the other placed pensively over the open page. She took a breath to say something to Lilith, but her sister beat her to it.

"No you don't. I know that look! You can't go in to see her! You know that as well as I do!"

"But… onee-chan…"

"Just stop it!" Lilith fumed. "You're not leaving me again! You promised! And don't think that I don't know about your little plan!"

"What little plan?" Eve asked in shock.

"You know the one I mean! To come back as Hazuki's daughter! I'll bet you didn't think I knew about *that*, did you?"

Eve looked down at the book again, unable to meet her sister's eyes. "No, I didn't."

"There, you see? You were going to break your promise to me the first chance you got, even after you forced me to spend ten thousand years alone in this library! I won't let you do it to me again!"

Lilith paused for breath, and Eve sighed. She was right, of course. Eve had promised not to leave her sister alone again, and she had meant it.

"Besides," Lilith huffed. "It's creepy."

"Creepy?" Eve squeaked.

"Coming back as her daughter is nothing *but* creepy! You're the one who's lived all these lives with humans: haven't you figured it out *yet* that they aren't like us? Poor Hazuki-chan's tiny brain could barely withstand lusting after you when she thought you were her *sister* . Do you really want her lusting after *her own daughter* as well? She'll snap!"

Eve glared at her sister. "Hazuki-chan didn't lust after me," she said in a low voice. "She *loved* me. More deeply than anyone in any of the worlds I visited."

Lilith blinked her huge, violet eyes. "Again, you're the one who lived so long among humans. You should know that they're fully capable of both at the same time." That said, she crossed her arms and looked away. "Which is, of course, the only way she could have resisted *me* as long as she did."

After considering this for a long while, Eve closed the book gently, squared her shoulders, and regarded Lilith steadily. "All the more reason I should go to her, then. Let me make amends."

"But you *promised!* " Lilith pouted, stomping her foot like a child.

"It's been ten thousand years," Eve reminded her. "What's sixty or seventy more?"

"That's not funny!"

"Please, onee-chan," Eve insisted. "You were fond of Hazuki-chan, weren't you?"

This gave Lilith a moment's pause. "Apart from the fact that she was a fool to pass up her every chance with me… yes."

"Then don't do this for me. Do this for Hazuki."

To Eve's shock, rather than continue her angry rant, Lilith instead burst into tears. "No! You can't leave me again! I… I couldn't bear it! Do you have any idea how lonely it is to spend ten thousand years with only a vulgar little bird to keep you company?"

"I… never intended it to be so long," Eve admitted, feeling a blush of shame creep over her face.

"That's what I mean! If I let you go now, you'll just start going through book after book again, and the next thing you know, it'll be *another* ten thousand years!"

"Please, Lilith," Eve whispered, grasping for a solution. "Just… one night. Even one night. For closure, if nothing else."

The sisters stared at one another for several long moments before Lilith nodded. "Okay, one night. But on one condition."

"Condition?"

Lilith frowned, and Eve realized she wasn't going to like what her sister was about to propose. "After your one night, you take the *Souma* from her. Humans aren't meant to have it anyway."

Eve stared at her sister, thunderstruck. "But… onee-chan, if I take away the *Souma*, Hazuki won't… *remember* this. *Any* of this…"

Nodding slowly, Lilith reached out to take her sister's hands. "And that might be exactly what Hazuki-chan needs," Lilith replied, her tone surprisingly gentle.

The next picture was as hopeless as the last, with Hazuki alone and desolate in a darkened bedroom.

"But you know as well as I do," Chikaru went on, putting on a brave face for her girls, "that even the ones who… leave this world… never

truly die. Hopefully Hazuki will have her chance, in this world or the next."

"Or maybe in a dream," Kagome nodded, speaking up for the second time.

"Indeed, Kagome-chan. Maybe in a dream…"

With sleep out of the question, Hazuki switched from pajamas to a soft cotton sport top and shorts and resumed wandering the house, hoping that something would shake the memories back into place.

The living room was the same as it had ever been, except for the picture of only a very young Hazuki on the mantel (where once had been a picture of both sisters). Idly, she picked up a magazine from the couch, then settled onto the cushions to glance through it. It was one she'd seen before: in fact, it was dated the week that she'd left with Ken-chan in the first place. Although months had passed, subjectively, she was right back where she had been.

Setting the magazine aside, she stretched and rose, padding barefoot to the windows to look out at the rain. The world outside was blurred by the water flowing over the glass, just as it had been when she'd left.

Had she ever really gone? Had Hatsumi ever existed at all?

Had it been a dream, brought on by the crushing loneliness of the Hazuki in those other memories?

Even as she considered it, though, two figures approached out of the rain, crouched under an umbrella. Holding it was a young man in an ordinary school uniform, and beside him, smiling as she waved farewell to him, was a golden-haired girl with red bows in her hair.

Hazuki stared numbly as the girl walked up the front path and opened the door. Once inside, she slipped off her wet shoes and

headed toward the stairs, shooting Hazuki a brilliant smile as she did.

She didn't dare call out her love's name, fearful that it would somehow make her disappear. Instead, she watched as Hatsumi walked upstairs, the sounds of her steps very real over the noises of the rain outside.

Reality blurred around Hazuki as she turned to look at the picture on the mantel again. Her breath caught in her throat as she saw, once more, the picture of the two of them as children, Hatsumi holding her hand as both of them smiled into the camera.

Images of that last day with Hatsumi flooded her:

… watching Hatsumi as she practiced swimming in the pool at the academy, then waiting outside the dressing room while trying desperately to stop her mind from imagining Hatsumi under the spray of the shower…

… the last dinner Hazuki had made for them, when Hatsumi had left her by signing "goodbye" rather than "goodnight"…

… the love letter and the accidental cut, Hatsumi's blood dripping onto the carpet as Hazuki looked on in horror…

… the deep pit of guilt as Hazuki stayed up into the night watching videos she'd taken of her sister, in which she'd tried in vain to coax her into a sexy pose…

Hazuki started up the stairs, trying to come to grips with memories of shame and regret that now felt almost as alien to her as the images of that sickly, desperate Hazuki who'd never had a sister. She walked down the hallway to Hatsumi's room, but paused at the door.

If I open this door, something terrible will happen. Those had been the words running through her head that night as she wrestled with whether or not to go inside. She had known, even then.

Again, she opened the door and stepped quietly into Hatsumi's room, finding her asleep atop her covers, protected only by the briefest of nightgowns. Silently, not wishing to awaken her, Hazuki sat beside her on the mattress. Her eyes were drawn to the bandaged wrist, then to the graceful lines and curves of Hatsumi's skin, and finally to the hair that had fallen into her eyes. Gently, Hazuki reached back to brush the errant locks away, and stared longingly at that angelic face.

I think there's no shame at all in falling in love with an angel.

If only she had believed that. If only she hadn't waited until that last night to try to kiss her Hatsumi. How different would their lives have been?

Was she being given a second chance?

"I'm sorry, Hatsumi," she whispered, years of regret filling that simple declaration. Brushing her own hair back nervously, she leaned closer…

Then, just as it had the night her world had ended, the clock struck midnight, and Hatsumi spoke. "Hazuki-chan…"

Hazuki reeled back, her heart screaming as the scene played itself out before her again. This wasn't a second chance. She hadn't returned to her home at all. This was some sort of Hell in which she was going to have to lose Hatsumi again and again, always on the verge of confession and absolution.

But this time there was no blinding flash of green, and Hatsumi did not disappear. She only stared up at Hazuki, sleep and confusion in her enormous eyes.

"Hatsumi?" she whispered. "Did you just… speak?"

Slowly, Hatsumi shook her head, then pushed herself up to a seated position and smiled gently, extending one hand to the other girl.

Unable to reply, Hazuki reached out and took the offered hand, allowing Hatsumi to pull her back to the mattress. Tenderly, Hatsumi brushed several strands of dark hair from Hazuki's face, then gently grasped her shoulder and pulled her close…

"… because in a dream," Chikaru continued, turning to the next page, "anything can happen."

In one voice, Kizuna and Remon made a sound that was part gasp and part squeal, as they saw the two women staring into each other's eyes, their lips barely a finger's-breadth apart.

"Next page! Next page!" Remon cried.

"Sorry, my darlings, that's not for our eyes," Chikaru grinned, her own eyes twinkling with mischief.

"So soft," Hazuki whispered as they broke from the kiss that she had literally crossed worlds for. She looked into the eyes of her angel, then crumpled against her and just let herself be held.

"Can you let me… be like this for a while?" she whispered.

Eve cuddled Hazuki close, her eyes filled with sorrow as she thought of what she must soon do.

She bent to kiss the soft hair of this mortal girl who had loved her more than anyone, and yet had never truly forgiven herself for it. "The thing that you really need," she whispered, "is something you can't catch, even if you chase after it. It's something that you had in yourself since the beginning…"

"No more pictures?" Kizuna pouted.

"No more pictures," Chikaru nodded, closing the cover of her sketchbook.

Remon fixed the older girl with a thoughtful look. "Hey, Chikaru-sama, ever since Hazuki and Lilith came to visit, you've only been wearing one bow in your hair. Why's that?"

"I gave the other to Hazuki."

"Oooo!" the second-years said together, eyes going wide.

"For luck," Chikaru explained, patiently.

"Mmm hmm," they giggled in unison.

Chikaru let out a long-suffering sigh. "You two…"

"Do you think we'll ever see Azuma-sama again?" Kagome asked suddenly.

Chikaru looked around at the three expectant faces, and for once, the Lulim president found herself without an answer for her goslings. "Perhaps, sweetheart. Let's hope so."

Hazuki woke to find herself curled up, fully dressed, on the floor of the spare room. Gingerly, she tried to rise, but a wave of dizziness overtook her, and she could just barely manage to sit up.

"I fell asleep… in the empty room?" she whispered to herself, holding one hand to her head. She had no recollection of how she had arrived here, as her mind was filled with fog. Distantly, she had the oddest feeling that she wasn't supposed to have awakened at all.

Once the dizziness passed, she gradually got to her feet, and to her surprise, it was much easier than it ought to have been. She ached from having slept on the floor, certainly, but her legs had none of their customary shooting pains, and her joints did not threaten to

buckle each time she shifted her weight. Dimly, she wondered if she'd be able to walk without the canes today.

A glance at the wall clock showed that she had overslept. At least she was still in her school uniform, though she would only have a few minutes at the most for breakfast if she wanted to get to the train station on time. She hurried into her room to get her phone, and to her surprise, found it sitting on her bedside table along with an antique comb and a red hair bow of the sort she would never be caught dead wearing. Even as she pondered the strange items, she noted a metallic flash above her head, and looked up to see a small paper-knife jammed into her ceiling.

"How did this get here?" she pondered aloud as she reached up to pull it free. It was very well crafted, with a crescent moon design at the base of the actual blade, but she could not recall ever owning one like it.

Still, it felt good in her hand, and more than a little familiar.

The bow and comb, too, had an odd, comfortable feeling to them as she picked them up with her other hand. She knew right away that they weren't hers, but she still felt like she should know them from somewhere.

Again realizing that she was short of time, she slipped all three into her skirt pocket (maybe they belonged to someone at school), then dashed downstairs.

Only upon reaching the bottom of the staircase did she realize that she had taken the steps two at a time. It felt so natural, but… when had she *ever* been able to manage the stairs without hanging onto the banister with both hands?

To her relief, a plate of breakfast was waiting for her when she arrived in the dining area, but as she sat and took up knife and fork, she stopped short.

Hotcakes?

They were still warm, and had been topped with a generous helping of sliced strawberries. Feeling no small amount of uncertainty, Hazuki sliced off a piece and took a bite.

It was, quite possibly, the worst thing she had ever tasted.

Tears slowly filled her eyes, but not from the taste. There was something raw and familiar about this -- something she knew she should remember, but when she tried, all she found was a hollow space inside her. *This is… Where did this…?*

"Mom, did you make this hotcake?" she called out to the house, but immediately knew better. Her mother wasn't even home, and would not be for several more days.

Turning back to the plate before her, Hazuki picked up one of the strawberries with her fork. It had been cut lengthwise, and for several long minutes she stared at the triangular shape formed by the cut.

" *That* was your last gift to her?" Lilith gasped, peeking over Eve's shoulder at the open volume. "You left her some of your terrible hotcakes?"

"She always said she loved my cooking," Eve said, defensively.

"People in love say the strangest things," Lilith shrugged. "At least you put strawberries on top this time. Maybe those will help."

Eve smiled to herself as she closed the book and placed it gently back on its shelf. "Yes, maybe they will."

"Hey," Lilith said in a strange tone, and when Eve looked over, there was a fond, playful look in her sister's eyes that she hadn't seen in ten thousand years.

"Missed you…"

Thirty hours, six trains and very little sleep later, Hazuki stood warily before the dormitory door. For the third time, she reached her hand up to knock, and for the third time, she could not bring herself to do so.

Even if someone were there, what would she say? *Hello, you don't know me, but I had strawberries with breakfast yesterday, and somehow I knew that I needed to come here and knock on this door* .

She briefly turned away, but then, with a sudden flash of clarity, she realized that she had been hesitating like this all her life, and it was time to act. She raised her hand again, but this time knocked twice, and waited breathlessly for a response.

The door opened, revealing a tall, pretty girl maybe a few months older than herself. She wore a tan and pink checkered school uniform, and her black hair was decorated with a single familiar red bow.

"H-hello," Hazuki stammered, fumbling in her pocket to bring out her own bow. "I'm… I'm not sure why I'm here, but…" She trailed off as she compared her bow to this girl's, and saw that they were identical.

In reply, the other girl simply held out her hand. Hazuki stared mutely at her smiling face for a long moment, then reached to press the bow into the hand she offered.

As soon as they touched, Hazuki gasped as a warmth rushed from this other girl's hand and spread through her own. It roared into the empty places within her, filling her with light and life and a beautiful green. Images flashed before her eyes, and as they tumbled into place, she felt love and loss, regret and forgiveness, yearning and fulfillment, and most incredibly of all, she felt hope.

Because it was at that moment that Hazuki remembered everything.

"Ch- Chikaru?" she whispered, tears springing to her eyes as she felt the *Souma* echoing between them.

"Welcome back… Hazuki-chan."

(for Ninemil)

The End

AUTHOR'S NOTE: And that's a wrap. Many thanks to everyone for reading what started out as an exercise in self-indulgence (what would happen if these two Awesome characters met) and eventually turned into a story that excited and inspired me more than anything has in quite some time. I'm not sure where, if anywhere, to go from here, but I must admit that the idea of exploring Hazuki at Astraea is intriguing ("Kaname, touch me like that one more time and I'll gut you with this letter-opener"), at the very least with a series of vignettes.

There is also the wild idea of Hazuki, Lilith and Chikaru dimension-hopping through the Yuri catalog collecting a team ("Yuri Force, Go!"), but that may just be the lack of sleep talking.

Thanks again, folks. And particular thanks to Ninemil, for reasons which I hope are obvious.